

CAPITOL STUFF

By JERRY GREENE

Washington, July 29—Sens. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) and Eugene McCarthy (D-Minn.) were purring like a couple of well-fed cats when they finished with Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard Helms at noon today. You could almost see the canary feathers around their mouths.

Helms, the nation's chief spy, looked harassed and well-plucked when he squeezed his way through a pack of reporters outside the Senate Foreign Relations Committee room in the Capitol. He was nervous and reluctant, but he allowed himself to be pushed before a battery of cameras under bright floodlights. "I regret signing the letter," he said quickly. "It was a mistake. I realize it was a mistake. I regret it and have apologized."

Then the lean and handsome spy boss, his slick black hair plastered in place, shoved through the mob and dis-

appeared down a corridor.

Helms is going to be sorer than he thinks. His great big fat boo-boo cracked open a door the rest of the Senate has tried to keep shut for years and has given the Foreign Relations Committee a backdoor entre into CIA affairs which nobody but a handful of professional liberals wanted it to have.

The Helms "mistake," the letter he regretted, was a little note to the St. Louis Globe-Democrat expressing "pleasure" at an editorial blasting Fulbright. The editorial appeared after Fulbright and McCarthy fell on their collective faces in a Senate fight for Foreign Relations Committee representation on a select CIA watchdog group from the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees.

Apart from several other glaring errors involved in writing the letter, Helms should have known better than to find "pleasure" in any sort of discomfort involving a Senator. That goes against the dignity in this debating club, and might even be compared to sin.

McCarthy threw the Senate into an outraged uproar late yesterday when he raised the issue of the editorial and the letter in open session. He drew shocked and indignant support not only from Fulbright and the liberal Democratic leader Sen. Mike Mansfield (Mont.) but from such solid conservatives as Sens. John Stennis (D-Miss.) and Sam Ervin (D-N.C.).

Helms immediately got hot on the phone to Fulbright and apolo-



CIA Director Helms
Letter 'was a mistake'

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gized, and somehow wound up scheduling a personal appearance before the whole Foreign Relations Committee this morning to repeat his assurances of regret.

Sen. Wayne Morse (D-Ore.), as expected, issued a resounding statement demanding Helms' resignation forthwith, but nobody paid any attention to that, particularly the committee. (The committee read his statement at his request, but dropped it without discussion.)

Helms Goes In a Side Door

Helms arrived 11 minutes early this morning and slipped, without comment, into a clerk's door at one side.

Fulbright was first to arrive, saying: "Why, I don't disapprove of people just because they disapprove of me."

Then Mansfield and the others trickled in. Helms stepped quickly from the anteroom and took his place beside the official stenographer. Reporters were ushered out, the doors closed.

It was obvious from the outset that this was far more than the matter of an apology. Helms tendered that to Fulbright last night. This was the nose of the camel inside the tent.

McCarthy came out before the session ended, beaming contentment. He was asked directly if the affair might help his efforts to move in on CIA supervision.

"This shouldn't happen in an agency like the CIA," McCarthy said. "I think the incident has opened up new avenues for discussion and a possible compromise."

Fulbright made no effort to hide his satisfaction: "A number of other questions were brought up. In that respect, this meeting had a salutary effect. There was a forthright discussion of a number of things not heretofore discussed."

Johnson Won't Call for a Resignation

Helms won't quit over this blunder. Nor is President Johnson likely to call for a resignation. The President is very high on Helms, who, with 20 years at CIA, is about as much of a career intelligence expert as we have in business. Half a dozen Senators scoffed at the idea that he be fired. After all, he has been CIA director only about a month.

But he had better not think his usefulness has not been impaired, so far as the U.S. Senate is concerned, and probably beyond those portals. For a very long while there will be lingering doubts over his judgments. The ever-suspicious liberals, who have a low tolerance point anyhow, will be waiting and watching for any evidence of error in intelligence estimates.

The precedent has been set. Those "forthright discussions" Fulbright mentioned can serve indefinitely as excuses for the Foreign Relations Committee to recall Helms for further questioning, or an elaboration, or an updating.

Perhaps Fulbright, McCarthy and friends are satisfied. They should be, for the moment. But Helms isn't home free.

At the end of today's session, Fulbright was asked if the committee had forgiven Helms and had told him to forget it.

"I don't think he'll forget it, Fulbright drawled. You can bet they won't."